

**Speech by the Slovak Government's Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities at the
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, 11.10.2006**

Distinguished Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank to the organising committee and the staff of the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for the preparation of this year's meeting. Being the Slovak Government's Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, almost every year I inform you about the results of the implementation of the government's policy on Roma communities in Slovakia. Despite the positive results that have been achieved in a variety of areas, it is very important to also see areas where the state policy is not resolute enough or where unexpected developments can be noticed. Therefore, my speech will focus, above all, on the situation in the fields of housing and education for the Roma ethnic minority in Slovakia and the government's measures that are related to these topics.

After the June 2006 parliamentary elections, the new Slovak government declared in its **Manifesto** that it "regards the solution of the Roma issue as its priority. It will support and implement all development programmes with the aim of improving the life of the Roma and the integration of the Roma community into the society, while efficiently using the funds targeted at the fields of education, culture, healthcare, social care, infrastructure, and housing."

Every individual in the society has the right to affordable **housing** at an adequate standard and in an adequate location and the right to access to utility services and infrastructure.

The standard of housing of Roma living in integrated and segregated areas of Slovakia differ substantially. A number of negative trends can be observed in the field of housing at present. First of all, this is the increase in the number of persons evicted for **rent arrears** in towns and the subsequent **eviction** and/or disconnection of tenants from utility services by private companies. A problem associated with this is the creation of **city ghettos** with accumulated problems. Almost one third of the dwellings in Roma settlements are illegal - these are above all shacks, mobile shelters, non-residential buildings, as well as houses. This fact has been confirmed by the results of the Sociographic Mapping project. The survey identified **1,575 settlements of various types** inhabited by communities perceived by the majority population as Roma. **Out of all of the settlements, 149** can be considered **segregated**, which means that these are located on the outskirts or outside a municipality, have no infrastructure and a high proportion of illegal homes. From the standpoint of the **availability** of utility networks: **electricity** is available in **91% of the settlements**; **water supply** is available in **39% of the settlements**; **gas** is available in **15% of the settlements**; and, **sewerage systems** are available only in **13% of the settlements**.

By means of its regional offices, the **Office of the Plenipotentiary** co-operates with the competent authorities at the regional level in promoting selected priority municipalities with a high proportion of Roma communities in the legalisation of land plots. At the same time, the Office provides consultation and assistance to municipalities in the preparation of planning documentation for the construction of technical infrastructure and housing. When dealing with the issue of arrears and eviction, the Office often provides mediation services between landlords and tenants in co-operation with community social workers.

With regard to the state strategy and concept, the issue of housing of the population in Roma settlements is dealt with under the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development programme – **Support for the Construction of Municipal Rental Housing of a Lower Standard for Citizens in Material Distress and Construction of Technical Infrastructure in Roma Settlements**. A subsidy amounting up to 80% of the acquisition cost can be acquired for the construction of these rental flats and technical infrastructure, while 20% of the acquisition cost should be derived from the work of the future tenants.

With the aim of proposing supporting instruments to ensure an adequate standard of housing for marginalised Roma communities depending on the local socio-economic conditions, the Ministry of Construction, in co-operation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary, elaborated the **Long-term Concept of Housing for Marginalised Population Groups and the Model of Funding the Concept**. The concept was approved by the government in January 2005. The principles and objectives of the concept comply with the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, the basic UN programming document in the field of housing – the Habitat Agenda, and international treaties and recommendations.

In line with the concept, the Ministry of Construction looks after the **preparation of planning documentation** for affordable lower-standard apartment buildings that could be repeatedly used as plans for the construction of flats in the settlements of socially excluded communities.

The Ministry of Construction also provides **funding** for tackling the issue of housing of the population of socially excluded communities within the framework of housing development programmes approved for each year. Last year, the Ministry provided subsidies for rental flats amounting to SKK **190,907,000** (approx. 5 million euro), which supported the realisation of 22 construction projects involving 456 flats. Subsidies amounting to SKK **25,710,000** (approx. 680,000 euro) were also provided for 16 projects for the construction of technical infrastructure supporting the construction of 322 flats. SKK approx. **170,000,000** (approx EUR 4,5 million) has been allocated for this purpose this year.

With the aim of utilising EU structural funds for the co-financing of the development of housing for marginalised population groups between 2007-2013, the Ministry of Construction has prepared the document “Draft strategic objective and priorities of Slovakia related to the EU Cohesion Policy for the next programming period of 2007-2013”, which was complemented with the **horizontal priority - marginalised Roma communities**. This horizontal priority has become part of the National Strategic Reference Framework for 2007-2013.

Education is undoubtedly the key to the resolution of the diverse problems related to the situation of the Roma population.

In the area of education, there is the negative trend of the **undue placement of Roma children in special elementary schools**. Elementary schools are wrongly interpreting and applying the legal regulations concerning school integration.

The rights afforded by the act on the system of elementary and secondary schools (**the Schools Act**) are guaranteed to all applicants and pupils in accordance with the **principle of equal treatment** in education established by the Anti-discrimination Act. The principle of equal treatment prohibits discrimination, for instance, on the grounds of gender, religion or belief, marital and family status, colour of skin, language, disability, age, property, descent or other status.

The Child Psychology and Pathopsychology Research Institute prepared the **psychodiagnostic methodologies School Attendance Ability Test and RR Screening** as part of the 2001 Phare project “Reintegration of Socially Disadvantaged Children from Special Schools into Standard Elementary Schools”.

In practice, the School Attendance Ability Test should help prevent the unjustified placement of socially disadvantaged children in special schools. The differential methodology should make it possible to identify children attending special schools despite the fact that they are not mentally underdeveloped and create conditions for their integration into standard elementary schools.

Both tests have been **distributed** to 67 pedagogical and psychological counselling centres. Last year, the Ministry of Education reprinted and subsequently redistributed these tests and the research institute carried out an **analysis** of the use of the **new methodologies** in pedagogical and psychological counselling centres. This analysis showed that these tests have been positively received and that they are comprehensible and simple to use.

Last year, the Ministry of Education also adopted a special **methodical instruction** concerning the procedure to be taken by pedagogical and psychological counselling centres in the evaluation of school attendance ability of children from socially disadvantaged environments upon admission to the first grade of elementary schools.

I am convinced that the thorough implementation of these tests will uncover the real potential and ability of Roma children for attendance of elementary schools.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my speech, I tried to present to you the most important measures that should help resolve the most urgent problems of the Roma ethnic minority in Slovakia.

Thank you for your attention.